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ABSTRACT

A study examined student responses to teacher comments on a student essay. First-year students at the Citadel, an all-male military school, imagined they wrote a paper on which a teacher had made 16 comments (eight positive and eight negative, eight having implied answers, eight having open-ended answers) and then rated those comments based on how helpful they were. Subjects were divided into eight groups based on their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) scores. Average scores for the ratings of teacher comments were computed. Results indicated no relation between preferred learning style (as indicated on the MBTI) and ratings of comments. Subjects were then asked why they rated some comments high and some low. Overall, the subjects found teacher comments helpful to the degree that the comments told the student precisely what was wrong and how to fix it. Findings highlight the potential influence of the immediate social context in they way students read and use teacher comments. (A figure describing personality preferences and a figure listing the highest-rated and the lowest-rated comments are included.) (RS)

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Personality Preferences and Student Responses to Teacher Comments

(A paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, April 1, 1993, San Diego, CA.)

Gordon Lawrence tells of a student at a diesel mechanics school who was given a diagram of an alternator, then given a defective alternator and asked to take it apart, fix it, and reassemble it, using the diagram as his guide. Frustrated with the diagram, the student simply took the alternator apart, carefully laid the pieces in a pattern, saw the problem, fixed it, then reversed his steps to put the working alternator back together again. Only after this process did the diagram make sense (Lawrence 41). This story illustrates that while diagrams may help some people understand a structure, other people need to begin with experience. One method isn't inherently good or bad, but for any given person, one method generally works better than the other.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, just as certain kinds of instructions are more helpful to some people than to others, certain kinds of teacher comments might be more helpful to some students than to others. One way to look at differences in learning styles is to consider personality preferences, as identified by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). In Lawrence's example, the diesel mechanics student was probably a Sensing type--someone who was detail-oriented, who attended to discrete pieces of information rather than to relationships between those pieces, and who processed information in a sequential, step-by-step fashion. His instructions were geared to Intuitive types, who prefer to start with the big picture (in this case, the diagram) in order to understand relationships between the parts. Figure 1 shows the two preferences on each of the four scales identified by the MBTI: Extraversion or Introversion, Sensing perception or Intuitive perception,

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Thinking judgment or Feeling judgment, and a Judging or Perceiving attitude. Someone's preferences on each of these scales can, individually or in combination, describe that person's preferred learning style.

What I did was take a student essay and write 16 comments on it: half were evaluative statements (8 positive and 8 negative), and half were questions (8 of which implied answers and 8 of which were open-ended). I distributed the essay to students in 10 composition classes and asked them to imagine that they had written the essay and planned to revise it; I then asked them to rate each comment in terms of its helpfulness on a scale of 1-9 (with 9 being most helpful). Using students' MBTI scores, I divided the students into eight groups--E, I, S, N, T, F, J, and P--and calculated the average score for each comment for each group.

I expected to find that the perceiving types, who generally like to open up exploration and delay closure, would rate questions as more helpful than the judging types, who tend to move toward closure. I expected to find that the feeling types would rate praise comments as more helpful than the thinking types, since feeling types generally report that they appreciate praise, while thinking types generally report that they find little use for praise. I expected to find that sensing and judging types would give higher ratings to comments focusing on issues of diction and mechanics, which are relatively quick and easy to fix, while intuitive types would give higher ratings to comments focusing on global issues and ideas. When I calculated average ratings for different groups, however, I didn't find anything I was expecting. I played with all sorts of combinations of preferences and all sorts of comparisons, but I simply found no evidence for the effects I had anticipated.

Somewhat confused, I went back to my students--two of the ten sections I had surveyed--and asked them <u>why</u> they rated some comments high and others low.

Their answers were illuminating. Figure 2 lists the three teacher comments that were consistently rated as most helpful and the three that were consistently rated as least helpful. Here are a few responses to the first three comments:

1. **"Opening and closing the essay with claims that your description 'cannot compare' to the real thing really weakens everything in between."**

[It's] narrow enough to point out just what the weakness is without the writer having to wonder just what is wrong.

Now he knows what the teacher is looking for.

[It] is helpful because it specifically points out a problem which can be changed easily.

2. **"Do you really need these commas?"**

The reader is helping the writer correct his comma errors.

It is offering a constructive solution.

I often misuse grammar and am always happy to have it pointed out.

3. **"Why plant the suggestion that your efforts must fall short of your intentions?"**

The statement is a question as well as an answer.

[It] gives the reader a good idea to strengthen the paper.

[It] is helpful because it points out a weakness of the paper which is also easily fixable.

Speaking of the three comments as a group, they had this to say:

[They give] the students an idea of what they did wrong and how to fix it.

These responses were helpful because they precisely pinpoint areas in the paper that have weaknesses or may need possible revision.

I found these responses helpful because they pointed out and raised questions to

specific items that were questionable in the paper.

These examples point out a direct point where change is needed. There is no wondering of which part is the teacher talking about.

I know what's the problem and it gives me some indication to solve it.

With respect to the three lowest-rated comments, here's what they had to say:

4. **"Don't you think this goes a bit too far?"**

It . . . doesn't specify just what and how is too far.

It doesn't have anything to do with content, grammar, or works cited.

This is a personal, totally subjective view.

It doesn't really tell what's wrong with the sentence.

5. **"Yes, this is the correct way to write your title."**

If it's correct, the writer does not need to know it is correct.

If the title is correct, why say anything about it unless you love it or hate it.

There is no use in pointing something like that out.

If it's right, then leave it alone. If it ain't broke then don't fix it.

Thank you, but useless.

Is this something that needs to be written? Did it make the student feel good knowing that his title was written correctly?

6. **"This fails to acknowledge than men can plant & women can mow the lawn."**

This is a useless comment. It does nothing to benefit the paper.

This comment is not only stupid but also confuses the student on the point of view of the teacher. The author didn't in any way put down women or put them in a "lower" position. So chill out about this women crap. Women are human, just w/ [a] few different body features, therefore they could do anything that a man can do--remember that. We don't have all day to

explain both sides.

Meaningless point to make. Not ready for political correctness.

[It] has no relevance to anything; it is stupid.

How often do you plant? How often do you see a woman mowing?

Who cares?

About the comments as a group, they said this:

These responses were least helpful because of their unspecific nature.

These responses were not very helpful because they lack specificity and are unnecessary.

[T]he student would need to be a mind reader to know what the teacher meant.

Overall, then, these students found teacher comments helpful to the degree that the comments told the student precisely what was wrong and how to fix it. For these students, the definition of "revision" seemed to be, "Fix the mistakes and give the teacher what he wants." If they haven't been taught some other definition, this one is probably quite functional.

While I think that instruction--or lack of instruction--is a major influence on how students view revision, I think that external constraints can also have an effect. For example, all the students I surveyed for this study were first-year cadets at The Citadel, an all-male military school,where students' lives are regulated by a 24-hour schedule. Many freshmen carry 17 to 21 hours of classes in addition to the military training that is part of cadet life, and most freshmen have very little time for sleep (outside of class). Not surprisingly, time is at a premium, and the cadets are necessarily goal-oriented. If their goal is to "fix up" a paper, and they see teacher comments as directions for making repairs, then they aren't going to be interested in exploring their ideas or structures any further, just for the sake of a vague goal such

as "improvement." They simply don't have the leisure to follow leads that may or may not lead them anywhere; they need to get immediate, tangible results for their time investments. With respect to teacher comments on their papers, they want us to tell them what to fix and how to fix it, period.

In fairness to the upperclassmen, I should point out that the freshman year at The Citadel is unusual--a year during which the new cadets are intentionally subjected to an unusually rigorous schedule. Upperclassmen are not subject to quite the same demands on their time, so they might have more time for the reflection that we would like for students to engage in when they revise their work. I think the specific demands of the freshmen year at this particular school heavily influenced the results of this study, and that a similar study at a different school might well yield different results. In other words, I think that while personality preferences may influence student responses to teacher comments, the immediate social context might exert an even stronger influence.

I suspect that the particular demands of this school create a kind of "corporate personality" to which cadets learn to adjust in order to get by. Such a phenomenon could be created in a school, a classroom, or even in a discipline. For example, Katya Walter's 1984 dissertation found that each of the different academic departments she studied had its own favored cognitive style, and that students with the same cognitive style made the highest grades in classes in that department. Recent work on writing in the disciplines documents that different disciplines value different kinds of knowledge, so it makes sense that members of a discipline would learn to value the kind of knowledge privileged by that discipline. In other words, the instruction that students receive--instruction about what kinds of knowledge "counts," how best to spend one's study time, and maybe even what purposes writing should serve--may well come from sources <u>outside</u> the classroom.

To move back to the issue of personality type, though, the preferences found most often among career military personnel are sensing, thinking, and judging (see Figure 1), and it's probably safe to say that the military culture favors sensing perception, thinking judgment, and a judging attitude. Sensing perception focuses on facts--on discrete details, rather than on patterns; on what "is," rather than on what "might be." Thinking judgment is objective and analytical--more interested in identifying and correcting problems than in praising what's already correct. A judging attitude is oriented toward closure--in making decisions that close off options rather than seeking additional data that might open up new options. A person with these preferences is likely to be organized, goal-driven, and efficient.

Isabel Myers, co-creator of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, describes ISTJs as liking to have "everything clearly stated"; she says that ESTJs like to have the results of their work be "immediate, visible, and tangible" (20, 10). In other words, if The Citadel has a personality type, it's probably STJ, and that personality type goes a long way toward explaining the way Citadel freshmen rate the helpfulness of teacher comments. Comments that are clear and specific, and that provide direction for immediate change, are valued. Comments that are overly broad, that ask questions which don't have ready answers, or which simply remark on some issue without providing directions for specific change are not valued.

Let me close with two observations. First, the results of this same survey might be different at a different school, or perhaps in a single department, or maybe even in a particular classroom--depending on the culture of that school, department, or classroom. Nevertheless, I think the study is valuable in that it highlights the potential influence of the immediate social context on the way students read and use teacher comments. Second, I think that while it's useful to know what students <u>want</u> in terms of teacher comments--or at least to know what they do with the comments we provide--it's important to note that what they <u>want</u>

is not necessarily what they need. Knowing that my students don't have much use for comments that attempt to open up inquiry or that challenge them to reconsider their views may tell me that they simply don't see revision as an opportunity for continued inquiry. The need for inquiry may be something that they still need to be taught. In other words, what they don't like may be related to what they don't know or don't understand, so knowing how they respond to my comments may show me where they need help. And helping them where they need help is, after all, our goal.

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PERSONALITY PREFERENCES

EXTRAVERSION - directs energy and attention outward, toward people and objects	**INTROVERSION** - directs energy and attention inward, toward concepts and ideas
SENSING perception - attends to measurable, observable facts	**INTUITIVE** perception - attends to relationships and possibilities
THINKING judgment - analyzes facts impersonally and objectively	**FEELING** judgment - weighs facts and values personally and subjectively
JUDGING attitude - controls and regulates events in a planned, orderly way	**PERCEIVING** attitude - adapts readily to change and welcomes spontaneity

Figure 1

Highest--Rated Comments

"Opening and closing the essay with claims that your description 'cannot compare' to the real thing really weakens everything in between."

"Do you really need these commas?"

"Why plant the suggestion that your efforts must fall short of your intentions?"

Lowest--Rated Comments

"Don't you think this goes a bit too far?"

"Yes, this is the correct way to write your title."

"This fails to acknowledge than men can plant & women can mow the lawn."

Figure 2